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## 2

## **‘Deeds not words!’ A comparative analysis of feminist militancy in pre- and post-1968 Europe**

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*Men got the vote because they were and would be violent. The women did not get it because they were constitutional and law-abiding (Emmeline Pankhurst, 1913, cited in Marcus 2010: 154).*

*Law and order are fundamentally against us, even if we have fought hard to achieve a few rights and have to keep on fighting for them on a daily basis.<sup>1</sup> (two members of the Red Zora, 1984, in ‘Widerstand ist möglich’ 1984: 39)*

This chapter compares and contrasts expressions of feminist militancy in two different historical and political contexts: the British suffrage movement in the early twentieth century and the New Women’s Movement in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the 1970s. While confrontational tactics in the British movement for female suffrage at the turn of the twentieth century, and the activities of the ‘Women’s Social and Political Union’ (WSPU) in particular, are probably the best-researched aspect of militancy in the history of European women’s movements, there is hardly any research on the role of militancy in feminist activism in West Germany. In this context the specific focus of this chapter is on the ideas

and activities of the radical women's group Red Zora (Rote Zora), which carried out dozens of attacks to support feminist struggles and was classified as a terrorist organisation by the West German government. By comparing the scope and impact of confrontational protest tactics in these contexts, this essay offers new insights into radicalisation processes in the two movements and into the ways in which the theories and political movements associated with 1968 affected militant feminist protest in the following decades.

Although the WSPU and Red Zora operated in different geopolitical contexts and held very different ideological views, both groups formed in the context of broader feminist campaigns and resorted to confrontational tactics because they felt that constitutional means had failed to improve the situation of women. The members of both groups regarded their ideas and activities as a form of feminist militancy. Feminist militancy, as understood here, refers to ideas and practices that aim to overcome sexist oppression and are based on the assumption that this objective can only be achieved with a confrontational attitude.<sup>2</sup> Rather than assuming that there is a clear-cut difference between violent and peaceful or militant and non-militant feminist activism, I argue, following Laura Mayhall, that feminist activists have practised militancy along a constantly evolving continuum. At one end of the spectrum there were constitutional forms of protest involving little or no confrontation, such as petitions. At the other extreme, there were highly visible attacks against property, such as bombings and arson attacks with a feminist agenda. In between there was a whole range of colourful, creative and provocative protest, which involved varying degrees of confrontation.

The first part of this chapter offers a brief overview of confrontational ideas and tactics in the British suffrage movement. The focus is on the activities of the WSPU and the speeches of its leaders, Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst, because they were a driving force in the militant branch of the movement for female suffrage in the UK.<sup>3</sup> The second part considers the historical and political background of feminist militancy in the FRG: the West

German student movement and the 'New Left wave' of terrorism. The final section explores manifestations of feminist militancy in West Germany with particular attention to the ideas and activities of the Red Zora and compares them with those of the WSPU.

### **The militant methods of the WSPU**

Although the movement for women's suffrage in the UK can be traced back even further, its beginnings are often linked to a petition that John Stuart Mill presented to the House of Commons in 1866 (Rosen 1974). Despite continued and sustained efforts to campaign for female suffrage, the 'sex barrier' was not breached before 1918, and it was another ten years before all female citizens were allowed to vote (Atkinson 1996: xiii). While most women and men who campaigned for the enfranchisement of women drew on non-confrontational means of protest, some groups adopted militant methods when they felt that other means of protest had failed.

In this context, militant tactics did not necessarily imply 'violent' or 'illegal' activities. 'Broadly defined', explains Andrew Rosen, 'militant tactics were those tactics sufficiently combative as to be widely regarded as shocking, and therefore worthy of comment' (Rosen 1974: xviii-xix). Compared to other campaigns in the suffrage movement, the activities of militant groups have received a great deal of attention from journalists and scholars. A number of activists and scholars have criticised the emphasis on militancy, because they think that it diverts attention away from the suffragists' ongoing and sustained efforts to win the vote for women by constitutional methods. Others defend a focus on confrontational action, pointing out that militant protest in the suffrage movement 'made a huge impact on Edwardian society on many different levels, and shocked it into reappraising the role of women' (Atkinson 1996: xiii).

The Women's Social and Political Union played a central role in promoting militant tactics in the British movement for women's suffrage. Founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel, the WSPU called for 'deeds not words' (Purvis 2013: 577). With this approach, the group set itself apart from the reformist approach of liberal suffragists (Atkinson 1996: xiii). In 1906, the *Daily Mail* coined the term 'suffragette' to distinguish the militant feminists in the WSPU from other suffragists, and the word was soon commonly used (Rosen 1974: 65). Laura Mayhall notes: 'The WSPU introduced the use of militancy, first interrupting Liberal Party meetings and heckling political speakers, then moving to the use of street theater, such as large-scale demonstrations, and ultimately the destruction of government and private property, including smashing windows, slashing paintings in public galleries, and setting fire to buildings and pillar-boxes' (Mayhall 2000: 341). While some of these activities involved spectacular performances and attacks against property, Mayhall insists that it would be wrong to reduce suffragette militancy to such highly visible acts. According to her, suffragettes practised militancy along a continuum which needs to be understood within the broader context of 'radicalism and women's political activism in the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras' (Mayhall 2003: 8).

One of the first militant protests that the WSPU organised was the interruption of a meeting of Liberal politicians in Manchester in 1905. This is significant because, as Ewa Plonowska Ziarek highlights, 'the first crucial task of suffrage militancy was to break the "conspiracy of silence" and to force an entry [of women] as speaking subjects into the political arena of discourse and action' (2008: 3-4). Suffragette speeches were militant not only because they might have 'incited violence', as prosecutors argued in trials against the WSPU leaders. They were also militant because women broke with prevailing gender conventions to make their voices heard in courtrooms, city halls, and in other public settings. Their mere presence in some environments and their disruptive behaviour in others, their

arguments in court, and their agitating speeches on the streets were integral parts of the continuum of militancy that enabled suffragettes to construct themselves as radical political subjects.

Although female suffrage was discussed in the House of Commons on several occasions, there was initially not enough support to change the law. This fuelled the militancy of the WSPU. One of the group's key arguments for militant tactics was their role in previous struggles in Britain. In a speech in London on 15 October 1908, Christabel Pankhurst claimed: 'Magna Carta was secured because of the fear that the people succeeded in implanting in the mind of King John' (Marcus 2010: 48). She added that the Reform Bills that had extended the franchise in the nineteenth century were not 'obtained by coaxing the Government' but 'by hard fighting, and they could have been got in no other way' (Marcus 2010: 48). Later speeches by WSPU leaders repeated this argument and developed it further. During a visit to New York in 1913, Christabel's mother Emmeline Pankhurst declared that previous extensions of the franchise in her country had been 'preceded by very great violence'; the reform bill of 1832 was passed only 'after the practice of arson on so large a scale that half the city of Bristol was burned down in a single night, [and] because more and greater violence and arson were feared' (cited in Marcus 2010: 154.). Although Emmeline Pankhurst distanced herself from violent attacks against humans and animals, she insisted 'you cannot make omelettes without breaking eggs', and in her mind there was no doubt that '[m]en got the vote because they were and would be violent. The women did not get it because they were constitutional and law-abiding' (cited in Marcus 2010: 156, 154).

The WSPU leaders argued that women had to overcome their inhibitions about the use of militant methods. Emmeline Pankhurst declared herself 'by nature a law-abiding person', who 'believed, as many women still in England believe, that women could get their way in some mysterious manner, by purely peaceful methods' (cited in Marcus 2010: 156,

155). While other organisations in the suffrage movement were convinced that these methods would eventually help them to win the vote, the WSPU argued that they had failed. Pankhurst claimed ‘there are women in my country who have spent long and useful lives trying to get reforms’, but without the right to vote they ‘could not change bad laws’ (cited in Marcus 2010: 157). As all peaceful means to fight for women’s suffrage had failed, she considered the use of militant tactics both necessary and justified.

The WSPU saw the government as the ‘enemy’, because it refused to grant women the right to vote. In the previously quoted speech in London, Christabel Pankhurst claimed:

We are only degrading ourselves when we plead with people whose ear is deaf to our pleading; when we argue with people who know our arguments by heart, but do not intend to give them heed. The only womanly thing to do is to fight against the Government, who are fighting against us. I think our enemy is starting to respect us, and to fear us. (Marcus 2010: 41)

The use of military terminology was central to the speeches of militant suffragettes.

Christabel Pankhurst insisted that ‘every follower of [the prime minister] Mr Asquith is regarded by us as a soldier serving in a hostile army’ (cited in Marcus 2010: 35). She stressed repeatedly that there was no other option but to fight against the government, because ‘[i]t is only by force majeure that Governments are moved into action’ (cited in Marcus 2010: 50).

As Atkinson highlights, she and other WSPU leaders made strong use of ‘religio-militaristic imagery’:

Joan of Arc, who was canonized in 1909, was its patron saint. The WSPU leaders portrayed the fight for the vote as a holy crusade for women’s freedom: they called each other comrades and holy warriors; their campaign fund was the ‘War Chest’. It was a language which was attractive to many. (Atkinson 1996: 2)

In their speeches, the Pankhursts repeatedly evoked a ‘joy of battle’ that had long been a male privilege; because the suffragettes had experienced the joy of battle, claimed Emmeline Pankhurst, they were ‘glad to do all the fighting for all the women all over the world’ (Marcus 2010: 162).

Many women, however, did not want the WSPU to do ‘the fighting’ for them. Opponents of female suffrage collected nearly half a million signatures against the vote, and 42,000 women were members of the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage.<sup>4</sup> Although they were fighting for the same cause, many suffragists did not agree with the methods of the WSPU (Garrett Fawcett 2014 [1912]). Even within the militant wing of the suffrage movement, the approach of the WSPU caused controversy. In 1907, Teresa Billington-Greig and other members of the WSPU formed a new organisation, the Women’s Freedom League, because of differences of opinion over internal democracy and militant tactics.<sup>5</sup>

The militant protest of the WSPU involved great risks for the actors involved and caused considerable property damage. Throughout the years, members of the organisation caused hundreds of false fire alarms, damaged famous pieces of art, smashed hundreds of windows and carried out a number of arson attacks against letterboxes and buildings. It is difficult to assess the overall damage caused by these activities, but Brian Harrison estimates that attacks in 1913 and 1914 alone might have caused more than £750,000 worth of damage (Harrison 1982: 26-17). More than 1,000 women were imprisoned for supporting the militant campaigns of the WSPU (Purvis 2000: 135). In protest against their prison conditions, many of them went on hunger strikes and were force fed under horrific circumstances. To break the hunger strike, the government introduced a new law, which became known as the ‘Cat and Mouse Act’ (Mayhall 2003: 102). Many suffragettes accepted serious health risks when protesting for the right to vote, and some died for the cause.<sup>6</sup>



On the outbreak of the First World War, the WSPU ceased its militant campaign to support the British war effort (Pedersen 2017: 3). While Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst were now encouraging women to engage in war work and trying to ‘rouse the spirit of militancy in men’ (Christabel Pankhurst quoted in Pedersen 2017: 5), Sylvia Pankhurst and other campaigners for women’s suffrage took a pacifist stance (Purvis 2011: 89). Sylvia was expelled from the WSPU and ‘devoted her time to working amongst poor women associated with the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS), an organisation with close links to socialist groups’ (Purvis 1996: 266). The ‘Representation of the People Act’ in 1918 allowed all men and 40 percent of women to vote, and the ‘Equal Franchise Act’ of 1928 removed the remaining property restrictions for women and reduced the voting age for women to 21 (‘Women get the vote’).

To this today, the militancy of the suffragettes remains unrivalled in the British women’s movement. In Germany, by contrast, confrontational tactics played a marginal role in the movement for female suffrage. Feminist militancy reached its peak there in the 1970s and 1980s, and needs to be analysed in the context of 1968, leftist political violence, and West German feminism.

### **1968 in West Germany and the ‘New Left wave’ of terrorism**

The 1960s, in a range of Western countries including the FRG, saw a number of groups emerge ‘at the Left of the Old Left’ and go on to make up what became known as the ‘New Left’ (Della Porta 1995: 24). While there were significant political and ideological differences among them, all shared, as Donatella Della Porta (1995: 24) notes, ‘a concern for a [more] participatory democracy’. Student organisations and other groups associated with the New Left rediscovered and further developed ‘repressed traditions’ such as Marxism and psychoanalysis (von Dirke 1997: 33), experimented with innovative and creative forms of

protest, and explored unconventional forms of loving and living. Because of Germany's fascist history and its geopolitical position in the Cold War, the social context in which the New Left developed in the FRG had a distinctive character. In the 1950s, not only the majority of military officers and judges but also many politicians and other public figures had actively supported or sympathised with the Nazi regime (Varon 2004: 33). The protest of the New Left in West Germany was, among other things, a rebellion by a post-war generation that refused the authority of that ruling elite.

Although their contributions have received considerably less attention than those of their male comrades, women played an active role in the New Left and in the student movements of the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Like in many other countries, the number of female students in West Berlin and at West German universities grew significantly. In 1965, they still only accounted for only 28 percent, but in 1970 they constituted 37.9 percent of the student population (Diewald-Kerkmann 2009: 51). The Socialist German Student League (SDS) played a central role in the theoretical framework and coordination of the emerging student movement.<sup>8</sup> As 'the main representative of the New Left, it built on the organizational and personal networks of the Easter March campaign, a movement for peace and nuclear disarmament supported by the German trade unions, which had gathered momentum at the beginning of the 1960s' (Klimke and Scharloth 2008: 98-99).

Inspired by demonstrations in the US, political struggles in the Third World, and collaborations with foreign students in the FRG, activists in the West German student movement drew on innovative and creative forms of protest such as sit-ins, teach-ins and civil disobedience. According to Della Porta, the dominant position in the SDS in the 1960s involved 'the limited violation of rules (*begrenzte Regelverletzung*), that is, a conscious, non-violent use of lawbreaking as a disruptive form of action' (Della Porta 1995: 37). United in rejecting state violence and repression, student activists took different positions when it came

to the question of violent resistance. Many distinguished between two different forms of violent protest: damage to or destruction of property, and violence against people. While they were opposed to behaviour that could harm or kill people, an increasing number of those in the New Left considered property destruction a tolerable or even necessary form of political activism.

Like in other countries, the New Left in West Germany was profoundly international. Quinn Slobodian (2012) has traced expressions of solidarity with activists from the Global South in the German student movement back to the early 1960s. In the second half of the 1960s, Rudi Dutschke and other leading thinkers of the movement promoted a globalisation of revolutionary forces based on the ‘foco theories’ of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Régis Debray, and on Frantz Fanon’s liberation concepts (Gilcher-Holtey 2008: 244). ‘At the 1967 national convention, Rudi Dutschke and Hans-Jürgen Krahel, the leading theoretician of the Frankfurt branch of the SDS, jointly demanded that West German students should move toward a “propaganda of action” in the metropolis, complementing the “propaganda of bullets” in the Third World’ (Klimke and Scharloth 2008: 101).

Two events in the late 1960s fuelled discussions about violence and violent resistance in the student movement. The first was the killing of the student Benno Ohnesorg by a police officer during a demonstration on 2 June 1967. Martin Klimke points (in highly gendered terms) to its impact: ‘A photograph of the dying Ohnesorg lying on the street, with his head bleeding and a helpless woman in an elegant fur coat leaning over him was to become one of the most iconic images of the German student movement and the 1960s in West Germany’ (Klimke and Scharloth 2008: 97).<sup>9</sup> Many felt that the bullets that killed Ohnesorg were directed against the entire student and protest movement. Initially charged with manslaughter, the officer who had shot Ohnesorg was acquitted of all charges a few months later (‘Urteil im Zwielficht’ 1967: 74). For the first time, West German student activists ‘saw themselves in a

position of vulnerability comparable with their Third World colleagues' (Slobodian 2012: 132). That a member of the police force could get away with killing a peaceful demonstrator shocked and enraged them. Their anger was also directed at the tabloid *Bild* and other newspapers which blamed the protesters for Ohnesorg's death, and for other acts of violence during the demonstration.

In the light of the Ohnesorg killing and other attacks against protesters, student activists began to discuss the limits of nonviolent protest. In a TV interview, the journalist Ulrike Meinhof criticised the state and media response to the events on 2 June as 'terrorism' (Colvin 2009: 31). A few weeks after the attack against Ohnesorg, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* published an interview with the student leader Dutschke, in which he declared: 'Violence is a key constituent of power and thus requires demonstrative and provocative counterviolence on our part. What form it [the counterviolence] takes, depends on the form of the confrontation' ('Wir fordern die Enteignung Axel Springers' 1967: 32).<sup>10</sup> The issue of counterviolence (*Gegengewalt*) had been discussed in the West German student movement at least since the publication of Herbert Marcuse's essay 'Repressive Tolerance' ('Repressive Toleranz') in 1965. Like Marcuse, Dutschke and other leading thinkers in the movement considered the use of violence legitimate if it was a response to a greater form of violence, if it was limited to situations in which other means of protest are futile, and if it took the form of a symbolic provocation rather than being an end in itself.

A second dramatic and agitational event followed just months after the Ohnesorg killing: the attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke on 11 April 1968. On the night after the attack against Dutschke, a mixed crowd of students and groups associated with the Berlin Underground scene<sup>11</sup> tried to stop the delivery of the tabloid *Bild* and other newspapers published by the Axel Springer group, which had crudely misrepresented the Ohnesorg killing and repeatedly stirred resentment toward Dutschke, the student movement, and the

New Left. In November 1968, leftist lawyer and political activist Horst Mahler stood trial for playing a leading role in the protest. Outside the court, a group of about 1,000 protesters clashed with police forces. In what became known as the Battle of Tegeler Weg, the conflict between members of youth subcultures in Berlin and the police reached a new intensity: dozens of protesters and hundreds of police officers were injured, some of them seriously (Kraushaar 2006: 527).

In the eyes of a small minority in the New Left, these protests did not go far enough. In May 1970, Ulrike Meinhof, Horst Mahler, and others founded the Red Army Faction (RAF). During its 28-year long existence, the group killed 34 people (Siemens 2007: 12) and became Germany's most notorious terrorist organisation. In the course of the 1970s, the group was joined by a number of other groups, including the 2nd June Movement (named after the day on which Benno Ohnesorg was shot) and the transnationally operating network of Revolutionary Cells. Like the Revolutionary Left Movement in Chile, the Red Brigades in Italy, Action Direct in France, the Red Army in Japan, the Weather Underground in the US, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the RAF and other armed leftist groups in West Germany can be considered part of what David C. Rapoport (2014) has referred to as the 'New Left wave' of modern terrorism. Although there were important political differences between these movements, they had two things in common: women constituted a significant part of their membership, and played a number of roles ranging from carrying messages to taking leading positions.<sup>12</sup> While women in the RAF and a number of other armed leftist groups in the 1960s and 1970s wanted to be equals to their male comrades, most of them did not identify as feminists. This distinguishes them from the Red Zora and other militant women in the feminist movement.

### **Feminist militancy in the FRG**

While the student movement in West Germany experienced an increasing fragmentation and polarisation in the late 1960s, a new feminist movement gathered momentum. There is no official founding moment for the New Women's Movement, but one incident during the 23rd conference of the SDS in Frankfurt am Main on 12 September 1968 played a significant role in its formation.<sup>13</sup> On that day, the feminist filmmaker Helke Sander, spokeswoman of the Action Council for the Liberation of Women (Aktionsrat zur Befreiung der Frau) gave a speech in which she criticised patriarchal structures in the SDS and called for a joint effort to tackle the oppression of women (Sander 1999 [1967]) – Mererid Puw Davies's essay below offers a more detailed account of Sander's work and its political significance. When it appeared that the SDS board members wanted to move on to other issues without commenting on Sander's speech, another woman SDS member, Sigrid R ger, threw tomatoes at them. Although their position was not uncontroversial, Sander's speech and R ger's protest mobilised many women in the New Left.

The women's movement that started to emerge in West Germany in the late 1960 became one of the broadest and dynamic social movements in the history of the FRG. It developed structures and a political agenda that differed considerably from those of the British movement for female suffrage and other feminist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 'In contrast to the historical women's movement', notes Ute Gerhard, 'the new one founded no associations or organizations, and had no leaders, but was rather composed of a loose network of groups and broader networks, projects and organized meetings which informed the public about specific issues' (Gerhard 2002: 328-29).

In line with other scholars and activists, I refer to the feminist movement in the FRG as the 'New Women's Movement' (neue Frauenbewegung). On the one hand, this name emphasises that the movement developed a new political agenda and new organisational structures. On the other, it highlights that the movement was inspired by the theoretical

framework, political spirit, and protest activities of the New Left. Many founding members of the New Women's Movement had played an active role in student protests, and they identified with the aims and principles of the New Left and the West German Student Movement: they were fundamentally opposed to the existing political structures and aimed to create a society based on anti-authoritarian, anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist principles.

The feminist campaigner and journalist Alice Schwarzer is probably the best-known proponent of an explicitly nonviolent form of feminist militancy in the New Women's Movement. Schwarzer played a key role in the feminist movement for a decriminalisation of abortion in the FRG and in the struggle to end violence against women. She collected hundreds of signatures for petitions, initiated provocative media campaigns, and took legal action against the sexual objectification of women in the media. The first issue of Schwarzer's magazine *Emma* in January 1977 sold 300,000 copies, and she is considered one of the leading protagonists in the New Women's Movement ('1977'). The very first issues of *Emma* included articles on and references to the suffragettes – an indication that feminist militancy in the British movement for female suffrage was a central reference point for Schwarzer and other feminists in West Germany.

Schwarzer has repeatedly argued that militancy in the form of 'hatred' against male oppressors was a driving force in the formation of the New Women's Movement, and provided a much-needed break with the political opportunism and passivity that had shaped German history:

But what would a liberation movement be without hatred? Without the question: Are we really going far enough? Are we really not cowards? Are we really not deceiving ourselves? Can we show solidarity also with those who are not, or no longer, acting with 'prudence' when trying to tackle this blatant injustice? Courage to militancy was

never a German strength. Nevertheless, it took hold of women in this period [i.e. the post-68 years]. (Schwarzer 1981: 24)<sup>14</sup>

Whilst acknowledging that she played an important role in the New Women's Movement, the historian Miriam Gebhardt (2012) and other feminist critics claim that Schwarzer simplifies and misrepresents the history of feminist struggles in West Germany. Regardless of what one may think of Schwarzer, it is worth noting that her militant feminist rhetoric reached large audiences and mobilised thousands of women.

Taking inspiration from a similar project in France, Schwarzer launched a provocative media campaign against the ban on abortions. In 1974 parliament passed legislation that decriminalised all abortions during the first trimester of pregnancy. However, a few months later the Federal Court of Justice (the highest German court) declared the reform void because it considered a decriminalisation of abortion incompatible with the sanctity of human life as defined by the constitution. The ruling was a hard blow to the women and men who had campaigned for the reform, and fuelled the militancy of some women. In March 1975, a group of women planted a bomb at the Federal Court of Justice in Karlsruhe (Karcher 2017: 58ff). In April 1977, there was a similar attack against the headquarters of the German Medical Association in Cologne. Like the bombing at the Federal Court of Justice, this attack was directed against an institution that feminist activists deemed responsible for the insistence on the abortion ban. The claim of responsibility for the bombing in Cologne featured, for the first time in history, the name and logo of the Red Zora.

Between 1977 and 1988, the group claimed responsibility for 45 arson attacks and bombings, most of which took place in the 1980s, with a few more following in the 1990s. Like in the case of the WSPU, it is difficult to estimate the damage caused, but previous research suggests that in financial terms it amounted to several million Deutsche Mark (Karcher 2017). Many of the attacks took up topics central to the New Women's Movement



including pornography, trafficking, solidarity with women in the so-called Third World, and issues around population control, reproductive technologies, and genetic engineering. While some feminists in West Germany openly supported the attacks of the Red Zora, most individuals and groups in the New Women's Movement rejected the group's approach. (Patricia Melzer's chapter that follows offers a more detailed discussion of feminist positions on violence in West Germany.) Like the militant suffragettes, the members of the Red Zora believed that if they were to improve their situation, women were left with no other option but to break with laws and social conventions. In an interview in Schwarzer's magazine *EMMA* in 1984, the Red Zora summarised the status quo: '[w]hen husbands hit and rape their wives, it doesn't matter.<sup>15</sup> When women traffickers sell our sisters from the Third World to honest men from Germany, this is legal. When women have to do monotonous jobs that ruin their health for a living wage, this is legal' ('Widerstand ist möglich' 1984: 39). According to the Red Zora, it was necessary that women draw on militant methods to defend themselves against the many forms of violence and abuse that they experienced in their everyday lives.

The Red Zora considered violent protest legitimate from a feminist point of view for a number of reasons. Firstly, they argued that the existing political regime was sexist and imperialist to the core, and that many women had no other option but to use violent means to defend themselves against legal and illegal forms of exploitation and abuse (ID Verlag 1993: 460). Secondly, the Red Zora claimed that the use of violent tactics could have an empowering effect on women. In a theory paper from 1981, the group critiqued the issue that passivity and submissiveness were instilled in women from an early age. Women had to stop thinking of themselves as mere victims of patriarchy and stand up to fight for themselves and other people to challenge the existing power structures (Die Rote Zora 1993).

Like the WSPU leaders, the Red Zora emphasised that it could be a liberating and joyful experience for women to engage in militant protest. In 1993, a part of the group stated:

Personally, we found it tremendously liberating to break with the feminine peaceableness that was imposed on us and to take a conscious decision for violent means in our politics. We experienced that with our actions, we could break through fear, powerlessness and resignation, and we wanted to pass this on to other women. (Die Rote Zora 1993)<sup>16</sup>

However, after two world wars and in the face of the Vietnam War, bloody coups in Latin America and the Cold War, the Red Zora could no longer evoke the same 'joy of battle' as the Pankhursts did. Rather, the group rejected militarism and authoritarianism in any form, and encouraged women to form small non-hierarchical gangs.

To do violence differently, the Red Zora endorsed a notion of feminist counterviolence. In the context of the group's ideological framework, that concept has a double meaning. On the one hand, it implies recourse to violence for defensive rather than aggressive reasons. In that respect it is very similar to Dutschke's notion of counterviolence. On the other hand, it signals the way in which the Red Zora promoted a concept of violence that was critical of masculinist notions of militancy in the New Left. The group criticised that in leftist circles 'the decision to join an armed struggle was often mystified as a revolutionary act per se. To understand this form of struggle as particularly radical without considering the subject matter, however, contributes to a mystification of violence that does not break with the dominant definition of violence' (Die Rote Zora 1993).<sup>17</sup> As long as armed leftist groups did not challenge the prevailing concept of violence, argued the Red Zora, they were only trying to seize power within the existing patriarchal structures rather than helping to overcome them.

For at least two reasons, this feminist conception of violence differed considerably from the violence promoted by the RAF and other groups associated with the New Left wave of terrorism. Firstly, in line with the feminist focus on personal experiences of abuse and

oppression, it was intended to be a defence mechanism against everyday violence. The Red Zora did not try to assassinate enemies or to attack military targets. Like the WSPU leaders, the group promoted small-scale attacks against property that did not cause serious harm to people. My interview with three former group members indicates that this approach was as much the result of personal ethics as of the life-affirming politics of the women's movement.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Red Zora and the WSPU had a feminist agenda, it is important to stress the strong differences in their political views and ethics of resistance. The WSPU considered militant protest legitimate because it believed that female and male citizens should have the same rights including the right to vote and the right to resist 'tyrannical authority'. While opposing a particular government, militant suffragettes demanded equal rights and opportunities within the existing political system. The Red Zora, by contrast, opposed any form of representational politics. The group considered militant protest necessary and justified because it believed that women should decide freely about their lives and be able to defend themselves against any form of domination and governance. The members of the Red Zora did not want to make use of the right to vote that the suffragettes and many other women had been fighting for, as they rejected the nation-state and its institutions, as the following chapter explores further.

## **Conclusion**

The WSPU and the Red Zora formed in the context of feminist campaigns that had failed to achieve their aims by constitutional means. In 1905, the WSPU resorted to militant methods in order to campaign for women's suffrage, almost 40 years after the House of Commons had rejected the first petition for female enfranchisement when it became apparent that the newly elected liberal government was reluctant to grant women the right to vote. The Red Zora

carried out its first attacks when the Federal Court of Justice had reinforced an abortion ban that millions of people opposed and that left them with no legal means of challenging the existing law.

Although the WSPU and the Red Zora held very different ideological views and pursued different political goals, the activities of both groups can be understood as forms of feminist militancy as they both drew on militant tactics to fight against sexist oppression. Both groups formed in the context of broader feminist campaigns and were inspired by protest movements of their time – the WSPU by radical movements in the nineteenth century, and the Red Zora by the New Left and the New Women's Movement. While the activities of the WSPU and the Red Zora ranged from small acts of sabotage to major arson attacks (and in the case of the Red Zora, bombings), the members of both groups avoided killing people. In both cases, the attacks provoked mixed reactions: some women expressed sympathy for the militant methods of the WSPU and Red Zora, whereas many others opposed them for ethical, tactical, or pragmatic reasons.

While the importance of 1968 and the New Left for West German feminism is widely acknowledged, the New Women's Movement has long been portrayed as an explicitly peaceful counterpart of the RAF and other groups associated with the New Left wave of terrorism. Although it is true that parts of the movement have categorically rejected violent means of protest, many activists found inspiration in the militancy of the British suffragettes and the movements associated with 1968. The feminist campaigner and journalist Alice Schwarzer is probably the best-known proponent of an explicitly nonviolent form of feminist militancy in the New Women's Movement. The Red Zora, by contrast, adopted and adapted ideas in the New Left to develop a feminist notion of counterviolence, and researchers have just begun to explore these and other manifestations of feminist militancy.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Gesetze, Recht und Ordnung sind grundsätzlich gegen uns, selbst wenn wir uns ein paar Rechte schwer erkämpft haben und täglich neu erkämpfen müssen.’ Unless indicated otherwise, German quotations were translated by the author.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this notion of militancy, see Karcher 2017.

<sup>3</sup> For a more comprehensive overview of militancy in the movement for female suffrage, see e.g. Mayhall 2003.

<sup>4</sup> The WSPU had approximately 5,000 members and the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies around 50,000 members in 1914 (Bush 2007: 2-3).

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Women’s Freedom League, see Eustance 1998.

<sup>6</sup> When Emily Davison was killed when trying to stop the king’s horse at a Derby in 1913, the militant suffragette movement had a first martyr. According to Rosen (1974: 200), Davison’s funeral on 14 June 1913 was attended by more than 2,000 suffragettes.

<sup>7</sup> Studies on this subject include Klatch 1999; Gosse 2005; Kampwirth 2011. For details on the role of women in the New Left in West Germany, see Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung and Feministisches Institut 1999; Kätzel 2002.



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<sup>8</sup> SDS (=Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund), not to be confused with the US movement of the same period 'Students for a Democratic Society'. For a detailed discussion of both movements, see Varon 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Klimke's description of course reinforces the gendered stereotype that women were more interested in fashion than in politics and played a largely passive role in the '68 movement.

<sup>10</sup> 'Gewalt ist constituens der Herrschaft und damit auch von unserer Seite mit demonstrativer und provokatorischer Gegengewalt zu beantworten. Die Form bestimmt sich durch die Form der Auseinandersetzung'.

<sup>11</sup> The 'Berlin Underground' is a name given to the alternative intellectual and youth subcultural scene in Berlin during the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>12</sup> To mention just two examples: previous research suggests that women constituted 30 percent of the members of the Italian Red Brigades and more than one third of the leadership of the group (De Cataldo Neuburger and Valentini 1996, 7-8); in West Germany, the percentage of female militants in armed leftist groups was even higher, and almost all leading ideologists were women (cf. Karcher 2017).

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of this event, see Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung and Feministisches Institut 1999; Schulz 2002; Karcher 2017.

<sup>14</sup> 'Das ist es wohl, was den Frauen, wie allen unterdrückten und gedemütigten Gruppen, am meisten ausgetrieben worden ist: der Mut zum Hass! Was wäre eine Freiheitsbewegung ohne Hass? Ohne die Frage: Gehen wir wirklich weit genug? Sind wir wirklich nicht feige? Machen wir uns wirklich nichts vor? Reicht unsere Solidarität auch für die, die nicht, nicht mehr, die Nerven haben, dieses ganze himmelschreiende Unrecht immer nur in "Besonnenheit" lösen zu wollen? Mut zur Militanz war noch nie eine deutsche Spezialität. Dennoch ergriff er in dieser Zeit auch deutsche Frauen'.

<sup>15</sup> Until 1997, spousal rape was not understood as rape in the legal sense.

<sup>16</sup> 'Wir selbst empfanden das Verlassen der uns zudiktierten weiblichen Friedfertigkeit bzw. die bewußte Entscheidung für gewalttätige Mittel in unserer Politik als ungeheuer befreiend. Wir erlebten, daß wir mit unseren Aktionen Angst, Ohnmacht und Resignation durchbrechen konnten, und wollten dies anderen Frauen/Lesben weiter vermitteln'. With the term 'women/lesbians', the Red Zora used an expression that was common in women's groups in West Germany. It was used to draw attention to the fact that the position of lesbian and heterosexual women was related yet not always identical.

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<sup>17</sup> '[die] Entscheidung für 'bewaffneten Kampf' wird oft als revolutionäres Handeln per se mystifiziert. Die Kampfform an sich als besonders radikal zu sehen, losgelöst vom Inhalt, arbeitet einer Mystifizierung von Gewalt zu, die mit der herrschenden Definition von Gewalt nicht bricht.'

<sup>18</sup> Focus group conducted by the author with three former members of the Red Zora on 17 August 2012.